

### Society on the Couch

#### Psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe's Cultural Criticism

Paul Verhaeghe, Professor of Clinical Psychotherapy at the University of Ghent, has been sparking debate in the Low Countries recently with his bleak cultural diagnosis. The target of his criticism is neoliberalism, which has elevated efficiency to the highest standard, and which equates success as a human being with productivity. This ideology has, Verhaeghe believes, penetrated every pore of our society, and even dominates our relationships with our bodies, partners and children.

Verhaeghe has for decades had a solid reputation within the scientific community as an expert on the work of Freud and Lacan. When *Does the woman exist?* (1987), the American version of his book *Tussen hysterie en vrouw*, was first published, it was praised by the high-profile Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek as 'a must for anyone who wants to understand contemporary psychoanalysis'.

The psychoanalyst gained widespread fame at the end of the 1990s with his bestseller *Love in a Time of Loneliness* (1998), an in-depth and provocative analysis of the frictions that exist between men and women following the fragmentation of traditional power structures and the corresponding division of roles, which was translated into eight languages including English. But his public reputation really took off with the publication of *The End of Psychotherapy* (2009), in which he declares war on the currently widespread idea that all psychological problems are illnesses. These illnesses are attributed to faulty hereditary makeup or disorderly neurons inside the brain, and are best dealt with by pills.

In *The End of Psychotherapy*, Verhaeghe describes a new type of psychological complaint which he is seeing increasingly in his private psychotherapy practice, namely that of patients who have not been able to construct any kind of stable identity. They are empty and aggressive and, in



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the absence of an idea of who they are, latch onto their own bodies. Verhaeghe sees the disintegration of stable social groups as the main reason for the emergence of these new types of psychological disturbance. One develops an identity, the psychoanalyst claims, by emulating a group with which one, unsurprisingly, more or less identifies. But Verhaeghe fears that neoliberal society has attacked the connective tissue of social groups. 'The desire for short-term gains coupled with the diminishing importance of knowledge and experience is leading to the disappearance of those things that hold groups together: loyalty and solidarity,' he writes.

The Ghent philosopher further develops his ideas on the social origins of present-day psychological problems in his latest book *Identity* (2012). Here he argues that, from a very early age, as our personalities are being shaped, we are pulled back and forth between two poles: identification and separation, or, in Freudian terms, 'Eros, which wants to merge together lovingly, and Thanatos, which wants to separate

aggressively'. Stable personalities find a balance between these two primitive drives, but in neoliberal times the focus lies heavily on separation and individualism. 'The result is competition, social isolation and loneliness,' argues Verhaeghe.

Another fatal threat to identity formation is the fact that nowadays, all traditional authority figures are under attack. 'There are no fathers anymore because the system does not permit any authority based on symbolism,' he writes. In the 1960s, rebelling against the traditional family and against power structures based largely on tradition was very liberating. But at the time, many people – including Verhaeghe himself – made a fundamental error in reasoning, and confused power with authority. And without authority figures, people who, because of characteristics such as age, knowledge or position, embody rules to which they too are subject, we will not make it.

The moral vacuum left behind by former authority figures has been filled by neoliberal ideology. The central article of faith of this religion is the conviction that all human beings have an innate drive to compete. If you allow them to exercise this drive freely, this will produce the best results and the most attractive goods. And this merciless competition is, morally speaking, responsible to boot. Because according to the meritocratic model, which Verhaeghe calls the fig leaf of neoliberalism, workers are paid according to their effort. Whether you are successful or fail to make the grade is dependent on your own efforts and abilities.

Anyone who does not manage to pull it off is considered either a failure or mentally disturbed. The role of psychotherapists nowadays is to get people back on the rails so that they can play their part in the system. Verhaeghe is convinced that the types of psychological disturbance they treat are closely bound up with neoliberal society, just as every form of society decides what constitutes ill and what constitutes normal.

Verhaeghe's main criticism of his colleagues is that they are trapped in a narrow world view and

turn a blind eye to the interplay between psychological illnesses and the way society is organised. They have completely decontextualized the psyche and interpret psychological problems as glitches in the internal housekeeping that can be treated with pills. In a flash the patient is relieved of all responsibility: the fact that he has dropped out of the rat race is not down to his own lack of ability but to the genes he inherited or a chemical imbalance in his brain.

The Ghent psychotherapist is rowing hard against the dominant and prevailing current of thought which attributes all human behaviour to the genes and the brain. His ideas on the social origins of psychological wellbeing push the *nature–nurture* pendulum firmly back in the direction of *nurture*. Verhaeghe's sharp analysis of today's unhealthy social order is also very timely; not surprisingly he is a popular media guest and speaker throughout Belgium and the Netherlands. His social criticism hits a raw nerve in times when few people can shake off a permanent feeling of rootlessness and uncertainty. It is no coincidence that the most resonant cultural diagnosis around today has been made not by a philosopher or a sociologist but by a psychotherapist.

TOMAS VANHESTE

*Translated by Rebekah Wilson*

PAUL VERHAEGHE IN ENGLISH:

*Love in a time of loneliness Three essays on drive and desire* (original title: *Liefde in tijden van eenzaamheid. Over drift en verlangen*), The Other Press Rebus Press, New York London, 1999, 212 pages. Online: <http://goo.gl/9d3m9>.

*Does the woman exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine* (original title: *Tussen hysteric en vrouw. Van Freud tot Lacan: een weg door honderd jaar psychoanalyse*), New York London, The Other Press – Rebus Press, 1999 1996, 290 p – 269 pages.